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Class forces, transition and the Arab Uprisings: a comparison of

Tunisia, Egypt and Syria

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This article intervenes into an ongoing debate on authoritarian regimes in the Arab world following the uprisings of 2011, in particular addressing the perceived failure of those uprisings to bring about ‘transition’ to liberal democratic models. Drawing upon the method of comparative historical sociology used in seminal analyses of democratization and dictatorship in Europe, Asia and the Americas, the article seeks to explain the varying trajectories of the Arab Uprising states in terms of several structural factors, namely the balance of class forces, the relative autonomy of the state and the geo-political context. The article provides an empirical comparison of the cases of Egypt, Tunisia and Syria as points on a continuum of outcomes following the Arab uprising. The article mounts a critique of the absence of class analysis in mainstream transition theory and hypothesises instead an important role for workers’ movements in bringing about even basic elements of liberal democracy. The empirical comparison is shown to support this hypothesis, demonstrating that in Tunisia, the state where the worker’s movement was strongest a constitutional settlement has been reached while Syria, the state with the weakest and least independent workers’ movement has descended into counter-revolution and civil war: the case of Egypt lying between these two poles.

Keywords: Democratic Transition; Arab Spring; Historical Sociology; Revolutions; Class Analysis; Workers’ Movements; Egypt; Syria; Tunisia

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The prevailing perception of the uprisings that swept the Arab world in late 2010 and early 2011 is that they have failed to bring about a long-awaited transition to liberal democracy in the region. The question has shifted from whether the so-called ‘Arab spring’ overturns accepted wisdoms about the Middle East to ‘why did the ‘Arab Spring’ yield so modest a harvest?’¹ Posing the question in this way returns the study of comparative politics in the Arab world to the *status quo ante* the uprisings: a debate alternating between searching for faint signs of ‘democratic transition’ on the one hand, and the attempt to understand an apparently resilient authoritarianism on the other.²

The intervention of democratization theorists into this long-running debate stresses political cultural explanations for the failure of democratic transition, such as the Sultanistic character of pre-Uprising regimes, the role of religion in public life³ or the lack of trust, rooted in authoritarian inheritances that obstructed negotiated transitions.⁴ In this article I argue that although the case may be made that the Arab revolutions have ‘failed’ – a necessarily shaky conclusion given the historic depth of these events—the transition theorists have overlooked an established pattern of agency in previous instances of ‘democratic transition’. This is the phenomenon, documented by Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens,⁵ of the centrality of the working class, and in particular organized labour, to winning the minimal guarantees of civil rights and fairly elected representative government that transition theorists consider the essence of democracy.

This flaw, I argue, is not an accidental oversight but rather derives from the implicit assumption of, as Andrea Teti puts it, the ‘democratization framework’s taxonomical end point – liberal democracy’.⁶ Treating the Arab revolutions as discreet events after which a ‘transition’ to this variety of democracy can successfully be negotiated amongst elites, renders the institutional set-up and timing of this process the most important factor: ruling out then, the political economy analysis of the respective social bases of the actors, an analysis present

in the previous work of democratization theorists.⁷ This focus on process leads assumed division between ‘secular liberals’ or ‘secular democrats’ and Islamists (whose democratic credentials are always in question) at the expense of any other division in the societies in question, to the extent that very notion of class and political economy literally disappears from the analysis. Where structures of political economy do appear, they are largely the familiar ones of the rentier state.⁸

The transition approach thus misses the role of the working class, and the strong correlation between the strength of labour movements and the winning of minimal democratic rights in the region. I argue, drawing on the framework of Rueschemeyer et al’s *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, that a comparison of Egypt, Syria and Tunisia on the basis of three ‘clusters of power—the balance of class forces, the degree of state autonomy, and the geopolitical conjuncture - demonstrates this correlation.’⁹ In keeping with the theme of this special issue, the historical sociology of state tangents and their impact on democratization, I seek through this comparison to demonstrate that a large part of the variation in the dynamics and results of the Arab uprisings matches the degree of mobilization, organization and consciousness of workers and their participation in the revolutions.

The paper proceeds in three parts. First I present a critique of the absence of the role of popular classes in democratic transition theory. Second, I outline the alternative posed to these underpinnings of approaches by the work of Rueschemeyer et al, and their method of comparing the respective power clusters of class forces, state autonomy, and geopolitical relations. In the third and final section I present a comparative narrative of the Tunisian, Egyptian and Syrian revolutionary processes, demonstrating that the cases with the highest degree of independent working class organization have achieved the most in terms of representative elections and constitutional freedoms, albeit with a danger of co-optation by the ‘deep state’ most evident in Egypt.

Democratic transition theory: a critique

If Arab states are in the midst of a 'transition', failed or otherwise, to what endpoint are they moving from their prior condition? The endpoints generally adopted in democratization studies¹⁰ share a common core: essentially liberal, free market, Western democracy of the Euro-American type. Democracy thus means a process by which an electorate based on universal suffrage approves the circulation of governing elites. The power of these elites is notionally circumscribed both in terms of what they can do (guaranteed freedom of association, speech, etc.) and the sphere in which they can do it (there is to be no *prima facie* interference in the operative power relationships of the economy, for example.)

Democratization for transition theorists results from negotiation between old and new elites to produce new institutions on the above model: mass protests, strikes reflecting economic discontent may form a crucial variable, but they are refracted through the agency of elite actors.¹¹ Indeed, the prolonging of the popular insurgency characteristic of the 'breakthrough' phase of democratization into the 'consolidation' phase may itself threaten the transition itself – a concern evident, for example, in some of the democratization analyses of Egypt that see the diversion of popular energies away from 'mass uprising' and into electoral campaigning as a *prima facie* good.¹²

The central variable for transition theorists then becomes the process of negotiation in which soft-liners in regime and opposition marginalize hardliners on both sides.¹³ Applied to the Arab cases, democratic transition theorists see the roots in particular of Egypt's failure to emerge as a liberal democracy as lying in the authoritarian inheritance of all actors: whether in the insufficient moderation of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood by comparison with the Tunisian Nahda, for example;¹⁴ the opacity of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and its preservation of prerogatives over significant parts of the state and the

economy; or the continued willingness of the opposition continually to engage in street protest.¹⁵ In Syria, Stepan and Linz ascribe—with good reason—the ferocity of the state's response to what they describe as its 'Sultanistic' nature, binding together the ruling core through (rational) fear of the drastic consequences of their fall from power in the context of sectarian division.¹⁶ The lack of trust between actors, or of effective institutions or correctly timed juridical and electoral processes explain the failure to achieve the limited liberal democracy assumed to have been demanded by those 'secular liberals' who constituted the protest movements.¹⁷

What are the consequences for democratic transition theory of this engagement with the Arab uprisings? Existing critiques focus on its patchy empirical record, or the frequent failures of expected processes of transition to unfold as expected.¹⁸ Most 'transition' states, Carothers argued, were not on their way to democracy but rather occupied an intermediate position of 'feckless pluralism or 'dominant power politics'.¹⁹ The 'stages' of transition were absent in most cases, elections were often a shallow, mechanical exercise and the inherited cultural, economic and institutional—most of all state weakness—legacies were vitally important.²⁰ Although recent work by democratic transition theorists displays a much greater sensitivity to the fragility of the (assumed) process of transition, they still tend to reduce the actors involved to a schematic triad: the old regime, the Islamists, and 'secular liberals'. This last group, it is implied, represent a middle-class, Westernizing influence and formed the core of the uprisings. They explain the 'modest harvest' by reference to the insufficient degree of mutual toleration or the lack of a liberal democratic, trust-building attitude amongst these actors in the transition process.²¹

What is needed is a critique at a deeper level: in the conception of the agency behind the uprisings, and the lack of a historical sociology of that agency. Moreover, empirical evidence tends to dispute the transition paradigm's concentration on the above "triad" to the

neglect of the popular classes. It is difficult to gauge the arguments of democratization theorists on the class character of the Arab world, because the concept appears only rarely in the literature. The word 'Islamist' appears twelve times in Alfred Stepan's article on Tunisia and 'secularism' seven: while 'trade union' features once and 'labour', 'worker' and '*Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*' (UGTT) not at all, despite the centrality of that organization to the fall of Ben Ali.²² In the special issue of the *Journal of Democracy* (2013) on the modest outcomes of the Arab uprisings: references to class are absent, except in the presumption that the protestors represented the 'secular middle class'. The only social cleavages that appear consistently in democratization analyses of the Arab uprisings relate to religious identity, whether to do with the sect to which one belongs, the degree of observance or the role allotted to religious sources of legitimacy in the political order. This perspective not only erases the actual dynamics of the uprising: it leaves behind resources in historical sociology that can be fruitfully used to understand the present outcomes of the Arab uprisings.

Historical Sociology of Democratization and the Role of the Labour Movement

The flaws of the democratic transition approach can be remedied with recourse to a different tradition in the study of democracy. With roots in the work of Guillermo O'Donnell²³ and even further back to Barrington Moore's seminal study, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966), the political economy approach to the emergence of regime types takes a longer and broader view, linking the concerns of democratization, historical sociology and state tangents. Of particular relevance here is the body of work, such as Geoff Eley's *Forging Democracy* (2002) and Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (1992) stressing the role of labour movements and the political left in winning basic democratic rights.²⁴

While Rueschemeyer et al in particular adopt the same definition of procedural, formal liberal democracy as that used by transition theorists,²⁵ seeking to explain the outcome and persistence of polyarchy, in Dahl's sense,²⁶ they criticize transition approaches focus on immediate processes rather than on the long-term evolution of power relations that lies behind them.²⁷ Instead, they offer the argument that democracy is an outcome of balances of class power and class coalitions. In particular three clusters of power relations are central to the analysis: the balance between class forces and class coalitions, the relative autonomy of the state and 'civil society', and 'transnational power relations'.²⁸

The large cross-case comparison in *Capitalist Development and Democracy* found the following regularities. First, the most consistent force pushing for democracy was the urban working class, except for cases where a charismatic authoritarian leader was able to incorporate this layer: this finding matched the expectations of Rueschemeyer et al, given that the working class both has an interest in general inclusion of the lower social strata to which it belongs, and the mobilizational capacity effectively to demand that inclusion.²⁹ The autonomy of working class organization was thus a key factor in the successful emergence of democratic reform. The most consistently anti-democratic class was the landed upper class, fearing the loss of reservoirs of cheap labour. A coalition of landlords and bourgeoisie that perceived democracy as a threat to their interests was an especially potent anti-democratic force.³⁰ The middle class —in the sense of salaried professionals, shopkeepers and other intermediate strata —played an ambiguous role, supporting their own inclusion but hesitant about extending political rights to those below them: they formed fodder for alliances either with the working class or the upper classes.³¹ Independent peasants in small-holding countries were a mobilizing factor for democracy while agricultural labourers tended to ally with urban workers.³²

Two further clusters of power are found relevant to the analysis of the balance of class forces and class alliances. These are interconnected in the form of 'transnational power relations' and the relative autonomy of the state. Geopolitical and economic dependency, Rueschmeyer et al find, has a negative effect on the development of democracy partly due to the direct effect of foreign interference, aid to boost the repressive power of the military and so on, and partly because of the resulting patterns of economic development that hinder the emergence and organization of strong labour movements.³³ As regards the autonomy of the state apparatus, too autonomous a state presses down on the 'dense civil society', particularly in the labour movement, which is necessary for democratic gains to be won. A state that is not autonomous enough, however, will likely to be under the control of largely anti-democratic elements from the landowners and *haute bourgeoisie*.³⁴

Across their historical comparison, Rueschemeyer et al find that the correlation between capitalist development and democracy is not due to capitalism per se—still less the patrimony of a heroic bourgeoisie—but to the struggles engendered within capitalism: capitalist development produces and empowers the working class, the most consistently pro-democratic force, while weakening the most-consistently anti-democratic force of large landowners.³⁵ In a finding germane to the Arab world, Rueschemeyer et al found that characteristics of late or uneven development have a strong effect on this pattern: working classes in the global south as a general rule being smaller, less organized and less differentiated from broader urban masses than in the capitalist core.³⁶ This recognition is particularly appropriate in discussing the Arab states, whose economies do not resemble those of the classical European cases. As Rueschemeyer, Stevens and Stevens demonstrate, and the analysis below supports, it is precisely the differential and uneven nature of capitalist development that provides for the foundation of the different outcomes of transition processes. This is still capitalist development, albeit in uneven and combined form. Most

Arab states lack the large and cohesive working classes that produced European labour movements and social-democratic parties but they all depend on some mix of resource extraction (for the global capitalist economy), the sale of goods or services produced by free employees (whether by state or private firms) or transfer payments from patron states in the core capitalist regions. It is these variations in the nature of capitalist development and their consequences for class formation that Rueschemeyer et al capture in their argument that in 'late developing countries, the relative size of the urban working class is typically smaller because of uneven, "enclave" development and because of the related stronger growth of the tertiary sector ...[meaning] that alliances across class boundaries become critically important for the advance of democracy'.³⁷

Yet, in focusing on a class analysis, does the approach of Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens not risk missing dynamics specific to the political arena? Particularly in Arab states, cross-class identities and ideologies appear to have more salience: does class analysis not neglect these? The first point to note is that almost all transition accounts do have a distorted and incomplete class analysis of the Arab uprisings: identifying the uprisings with an entity called the 'secular Westernised middle class', or its youth, counter-posed, not to another class but to an ideological current, Islamism. An explicit class analysis that can then be empirically investigated is a necessary corrective. Second, one must distinguish between levels of analysis: between the political arena, the events and interactions of which are of course contingent, and the collectivities upon which those interactions are based. Sectarian heterogeneity in Syria, to take perhaps the toughest challenge to class analysis, is not an inherent natural characteristic: it is a socially constructed collectivity produced and reproduced through access to the state and the political economy that it oversees. This is not to say that sectarian identification is not a significant—at the time of writing the most significant—factor in Syrian politics, but that there is a basis in political economy for this

salience. One may usefully distinguish between '(1) the class structure grounded in the organization of production and modified by patterns of mobility and interaction, (2) the ideas and attitudes of the members of a class, and (3) the determination and pursuit of collective goals through organized action on behalf of a class'.³⁸ The first will always be present; the second and third vary, with the extent of sectarian identity or cross-class ideology important elements in that variation.

How then does this approach aid in answering the question: 'why did the Arab spring produce so modest a harvest?' It does so by directing our attention, with some caveats, to the three inter-related levels of the balance of class forces and class alliances: the degree of state, or more often regime, autonomy within a wider political economy of capital accumulation; and the interpenetration of regional and global geopolitical competition. As demonstrated below, analysis of three cases most representative of the continuum of outcomes of the Arab uprisings, a strong confirmation of the class model emerges. In summary, Tunisia, site of the earliest uprising and of the strongest labour movement participation within it, resembles most closely the ideal of constitutionally limited representative government, or bourgeois democracy. Syria, with both the weakest (recent) record of labour organization and consequent low level of working-class participation in the uprising, has entered a path of convulsive violence seized by civil war, multi-lateral foreign intervention and the rise of a contender to the state itself in the guises of *Da'esh*, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. Egypt lies somewhere between these poles: a popular uprising with significant labour participation, followed by the return of a military regime that co-opted part of the leadership of the fledgling independent union movement.

Comparative case study (1): Tunisia

Tunisia is usually seen as closest to the model of democratic transition used in mainstream analyses. Although arguably still far from the demands of 'bread, freedom and national dignity' Tunisia has achieved a negotiated constitution³⁹. Although slow in reaching this outcome —marked also by confrontations between the Islamists, the Left, and political fragments of the *ancien régime* — the popularly elected Constituent Assembly produced broad guarantees of the procedural democracy sought after in democratic transition theory.⁴⁰

What are the class interests, class fractions and alliances of classes at play in the Tunisian case? At the outset, we immediately encounter a divergence from classic European or Latin American cases, the absence of class of large landholders reliant on labour-repressive agriculture, whom Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens see as the most consistently anti-democratic force, particularly when allied to an urban manufacturing bourgeoisie and a militarist state. These classic marriages of 'iron and rye' have never characterized the ruling classes of the Arab states. Instead, the 1950s and 1960s were characterized by the rise of nationalist-minded middle-ranking military officers in a context of wider social turmoil, who established, authoritarian populist regimes that embarked on some version of 'passive revolution' or 'revolution from above': breaking the power of large-landholders (in some cases colonists), enacting redistributive measures in favour of the middle peasantry and expropriating the urban merchant bourgeoisie (often from minority communities) in order to establish a state-led national capitalism.⁴¹ The ruling classes against whom the Arab uprisings were directed were thus not the holdovers of a previous mode of production, but the comparatively recent mutations of a previous social settlement. Tunisia, unusually, was the site of relatively large-scale colonization by European settlers, who controlled around a fifth of the arable land⁴². Land was redistributed to Tunisians albeit gradually: large holdings did develop but, as discussed below, these were outgrowths of an existing capitalist class rather than labour-repressive grandees.⁴³

By the 1980s, in common with the rest of the region, a new Tunisian leadership (under Zine Abidine Ben Ali) turned to a neo-liberal model, especially following an International Monetary Fund restructuring plan imposed in 1987.⁴⁴ It is this generation of a new private and state bourgeoisie that was (and remains even now) the predominant class in Tunisia as elsewhere.⁴⁵ Neoliberal policies of privatization and greater market involvement implied not a retreat of the state but rather its recasting.⁴⁶ Thus, in Tunisia a core ruling group around Ben Ali—and particularly his wife Leila Trabelsi—accumulated enormous wealth through the state, a relationship that radiated out and down through both the state apparatus and the new capitalists close to it.⁴⁷ Linked to a circuit of largely European capital,⁴⁸ this class fraction derived its surplus partly from state licensing and property speculation and was linked to large agricultural producers: but agriculture as a an export-industry rather than large labour-repressive estates.⁴⁹

At this point, the second two clusters of power discussed in *Capitalist Development and Democracy* come into play. For Rueschemeyer et al, the degree of state autonomy from anti-democratic class forces is crucial for the emergence of constitutional democracy—both autonomy from economically dominant classes, and from a particular family core of the ruling group, (with the opposite usually referred to as ‘Sultanism’ or patrimonialism in the broader literature.⁵⁰ In this respect, the Tunisian state was recognisably very responsive to the needs of capital, ensconced within its ruling committees,⁵¹ while the ruling family was nonetheless much more separable from the broader interests of this class. Once the UGTT strikes became general, threatening the economy with collapse, the Ben Ali-Trabelsi clan were jettisoned. The armed forces were unwilling to continue the repression after the inflaming of the popular movement by the early violent state response, reflecting the independence of the high command.⁵² This tight web of state, class and familial interest

locked out the Islamist bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, who articulated their discontent in a universalist language of 'justice'.⁵³

Rueschemeyer et al's third cluster, that of the geopolitical constellations of power may also be disaggregated along two axes: one of these being the deep structural effects of uneven development on the balance of class forces and the other being the conjunctural geopolitical interests at play. In the Tunisian case, unlike Egypt and to an even greater extent Syria, the latter were almost completely concentrated in one relationship: with the former colonial power, France— by extension the European Union and the USA. Ben Ali's repressive *laïciste* regime was considered an important ally in the 'war on terror' and Tunisia formed the lynchpin of trans-Mediterranean trade agreements⁵⁴. French support in money and materiel had long sustained the Ben Ali regime, until the very eve of the uprising.⁵⁵ The assumption that Western influence promotes democracy is undermined by the empirical evidence in this case:⁵⁶ Nonetheless, the absence of inter-state rivalry over the Tunisian revolution allowed a greater space for popular initiatives to push the process forward: a luxury not afforded to Syrians, for example.

What of the organised labour force identified by Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens as the most consistently democratic force? Outside of Aden, the Tunisian General Union of Workers (UGTT) played the most significant role in anti-colonial struggle of any Arab state.⁵⁷ Being an organization of significant social weight, the UGTT is of course no monolith: with deep divisions in attitude to the old regime and its remnants, for example, between rank and file members and the upper apparatus. In the post-independence period, the UGTT was co-opted into the Bourguibist regime. Even then, the UGTT did retain a degree of independence, reflecting the density of its rank and file organization. There were major struggles between workers and the regime in 1978 and 1983-4 – the outcome of the latter being a weakening of the UGTT.⁵⁸ The organization persisted, however, and contained within

it many activists independent of the regime-linked leadership with experience in significant class struggle, and in particular a major strike at the Gafsa mine. This was to become crucial in the 2010-11 uprising. The UGTT was, of course, not the sole actor in the Tunisian revolution: the motive force came from a heterogeneous revolutionary subject on the streets. However, it would be almost impossible to find another organization—not even the Islamist Nahda party, which was relatively marginal at the beginning of the revolt—that played as consistently significant a role as the UGTT. In this aspect Tunisia did indeed differ starkly from the other cases. Indeed, it was networks of UGTT activists that spread the uprising from the impoverished interior to the main cities, and organized the strike wave that finally put paid to Ben Ali's rule.⁵⁹

How did the role of the organised working class then affect the 'transition' period in Tunisia? First, pressure from the lower ranks of the UGTT was significant in forcing a more thorough purge of the ruling party, the *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique* (RCD) (forcing the resignation of the union's ministers in the first post-Ben Ali cabinet), by comparison to Egypt where the cadres of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) resurfaced in another guise. The union also led the protests that won the commitment to an elected National Constituent Assembly in October 2011.⁶⁰ Thirdly, when in these elections, the Islamist Ennahda won a plurality and governed as part of a 'troika' with the social democratic Takatol and liberal Congress for the Republic, unleashing a tripartite struggle among the Islamists (rooted in a fraction of the upper bourgeoisie, and with very wide cadres of petty bourgeois support), the remnants of the old regime, and the popular revolutionary movements, the union federation in Tunisia, unlike in Egypt, was the undeniable core of the latter. As Ennahda came into government, and the class struggles that had ignited the uprising continued (for example giving rise to mass strikes in towns such as Kesserine and Siliana) the hostility between the workers' movement and associated leftist parties, and the Islamists

sharpened, particularly following the assassination of Leftist politicians by presumed Islamists. Fourth, however, the UGTT leadership, along with the employers' organization and others played a mediating role in a 'national dialogue' that brought about the conclusion of the constitution, the 'technocratic' government under former industry minister Mehdi Joma'a and the promise of further parliamentary and presidential elections on the constitutional basis.⁶¹ Workers, therefore, played the decisive role in setting Tunisia on the road to democratic transition.

Comparative Case Study (2): Egypt

At the time of writing (early 2015), Egyptian politics seems to have returned to a more highly repressive version of the *status quo ante* the 25th of January 2011, with a heavier dose of nostalgia for the high water mark of Egyptian power in the 1950s and 60s. Lacking the developmental resources or redistributive policies of that time, the success of this austerity Nasserism cannot be vouchsafed. Nonetheless, as described below, this discourse has had a significant effect in binding parts of the independent labour movement to the state. How did Egypt's 'transition'—never a propitious undertaking so long as the deep structures of the regime remained intact, if damaged—reach this bind? A flawed process definitely played a part, but the Egyptian trajectory reaches much further back.

As in Tunisia, by 2011 in Egypt, the locus of class differentiation had become urban rather than agrarian: after years of contradictory land reform initiatives, the countryside was dominated by property speculators and agro-capitalists rather than agrarian magnates dependent on semi-servile labour.⁶² Who then composed the ruling class—those with most to lose— of Egypt in 2011? Again, the Egyptian case presents a fuller development of the Tunisian: an interlocking core of state-licensed and connected capital and the repressive state apparatus following more than three decades of *infitah*.⁶³ As well as the core group of

nouveaux riches, Egypt's private sector was long-standing enough to produce a business class not directly imbricated with the Mubarak family, but who closely identified with state when it was under threat.⁶⁴ Second, the Egyptian military itself had become a bourgeoisie-in-arms, controlling vast stretches (estimates varying between ten and forty per cent) of the economy.⁶⁵

The final group, as in Tunisia, was the Islamist bourgeoisie. Largely excluded from the patronage of the regime, these pious industrialists developed their own commercial networks reaching deep down into local neighbourhoods and attracting the petit bourgeois who had long formed the core of Islamist support.⁶⁶ Of course, the appeal of Islamist ideology (in Brotherhood or Salafist form) spreads beyond a specific class, as does any ideology. To describe the Brotherhood as a bourgeois force with petit bourgeois and mass support does not mean a perfect congruity between these classes and the organization: it refers to the orientation of the group, the structural class position of its leading members and the class impact of the political economy envisaged by its ideology. On all these measures, the Brotherhood can reasonably be considered a bourgeois force, with a middle class periphery. Its leading members are themselves wealthy entrepreneurs and it derives its funding from donations (and external states) rather than from organized labour.⁶⁷ It orients its political work on commercial organizations and professional syndicates. Its electoral support amongst the urban poor is based on a passive relationship: ideological identification, to be sure, but also influence won by charitable services. Its stance on economic issues envisages a market economy, 'just' wages ensured by scriptural sanction rather than worker self-organization and the removal of impediments to the fair operation of the market.⁶⁸ All ideologies contain some element of cross-class appeal—they would not be ideologies if they did not—but they do so in order to identify broader layers with an organization that has definite class content.

The history of the Egyptian revolution can thus to some extent be read through the fortunes of these class fractions: the military capitalists removing the Mubarak clique when it

became clear the mass uprising against them threatened wider interests. This was to become crucial when the mass protests of the 18 days coalesced with a strike wave that penetrated the military enterprises themselves on the 10th and 11th of February 2011: at this point, as in Tunisia, the military simply rid themselves of Mubarak. The resulting rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, presented as 'transition' what was actually a road-map to the restoration of the deep state.⁶⁹ The military and Islamists briefly converged around their shared animosity Gamal Mubarak's crony capitalist faction, only later to split, leading to the exclusion of the Islamists.

In relation to the geopolitical conjuncture, where Tunisia saw a largely uni-directional relationship, Egypt—a far larger and more important state—was subject to a largely one-way influence at the global level and intra-Gulf competition at the regional level. Since Sadat's turn away from Soviet influence in the 1970s, the US had formed the major sponsor of the regime and in particular the Egyptian military. This relationship remained in place after the '18 Days'. The US government's call for an 'orderly transition' (to Mubarak's appointed deputy Omar Soleiman) undoubtedly signalled that Mubarak had become a liability.⁷⁰ The Obama administration showed a brief interest in the Muslim Brotherhood as a force for stability,⁷¹ only to decline to use the word 'coup' or strongly condemn the renewed repression after June 30th 2013. At the regional level, the intervention of Gulf oil states into the post-Egyptian revolutionary scene was much more competitive. In broad-brush strokes, Qatar funded and supported the Muslim Brotherhood, while the Saudis backed either Salafi groups as a counterweight to its rivals' influence, or retained their relationship with the Egyptian military.⁷² This aspect confirms a further hypothesis of Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens: the influx of resources flowed not to the labour movement or subaltern classes but to other class forces. The flow of external resources thus empowered the authoritarian military and the Muslim Brotherhood, squeezing out the original revolutionary forces of the uprising.

What of the role of those subaltern classes, and in particular, the working class in the Egyptian revolution? Although numerically large, Egypt's formally employed and organised working class is still a minority compared to the informal sector and those in 'vulnerable employment'.⁷³ From the Free Officers' coup until the strike wave that preceded the revolution, Egyptian unions were state-controlled.⁷⁴ Yet, more than 1.7 million workers took part in more than 1,900 strikes and other protests (in the absence of free unions) between 2004 and 2008.⁷⁵ It was this strike wave that began to weaken the barrier of fear, prefiguring the revolution of 2011. A new independent organization emerged: the Egyptian Independent Trade Union Federation (EITUF), which was to play a significant role both before and after the fall of Mubarak. It was, to be sure, massive demonstrations that (at least temporarily) broke the power of the police apparatus, rather than strikes, although workers were present on them. However, the final days of Mubarak's reign, the 10th and 11th of February marked a huge increase in strike activity. A general strike called on Wednesday the 9th of February spread quickly even to the military production facilities: at this point, the core ruling apparatus decided to dispense with Mubarak and declare the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. The level of labour actually increased after this. There were 1,400 recorded collective labour actions in 2011; 1,969 in 2012 and 2,400 in the first quarter of 2013.⁷⁶

Yet what did not occur was the much anticipated 'passing-over' of workers' struggles into a general challenge to the state. The uprising of the '18 days', and of the succeeding 18 months, but did not destroy the deep state. The movement against Morsi was much more contradictory, including both those who wanted to extend the revolution and those who sought to roll it back. The workers movement did not become an indispensable central actor but remained caught in the struggle between the deep state and the (business-oriented) Muslim Brotherhood.

In part this outcome was the result of the predominant set of politics and institutional heritage of the workers' movement. The movement remained divided and dominated the old regime unions controlling the pension funds and other institutional sources of power. The dominant political element was committed to the side of the state against the Muslim Brotherhood, a hangover of nationalist corporatism. Thus Kamal abu Eita, leader of EITUF became the first minister of labour in the post-coup government.⁷⁷ Hamdeen Sabahi, standard-bearer of the nationalist Left, and winner of a fifth of the vote in the 2012 presidential election, supported the coup of the 3rd of July 2013.

The key force that Rueschemyer, Stephens and Stephens identify as winning minimal democratic reforms was thus in Egypt hampered by its institutional legacy, and by the predominant politics of attachment to the state. Yet might there have been even deeper reasons behind the social character of the Egyptian revolution: urban and popular, involving workers and strikes, but not a *workers' revolution* as such? Mention has already been made of the vast rural-urban migration that Egypt experienced as a result of policies of 'accumulation by dispossession' on the land: a set of policies replicated in urban areas also.⁷⁸ The expanding urban and peri-urban population were not, for the most part, moving to steady waged employment in organised workplaces, but to semi, under, and unemployment. Indeed, much of the pre-revolutionary strike wave was directed against policies of deregulation, privatisation and 'precarization'.⁷⁹

In the context of a strong, independent and politically-oriented trade union movement a revolutionary subject of this sort could end up winning minimal democratic demands, as in Tunisia. A difficult balance prevailed: the necessary conditions being that the labour movement and its allies are strong enough to be threatening, but equally that the leadership of that movement is willing to reduce its demands to a degree that will not threaten the privileged strata. For all its efforts, the Egyptian workers' movement did not reach this level,

leaving the revolution in a more high-stakes position: either to crack open the deep state and establish some other institutions of rule (presumably to the detriment of the bourgeoisie clustered around that state) or retreat in the face of the return of its return. In the end, Egypt took the latter path.

Comparative Case Study (3): Syria

Syria lies at the other end of the continuum from Tunisia. At the time of writing, the unyielding counter-revolution of the Assad regime looked close to triumph: or at least to transforming the revolution into a conflict with its Sunni chauvinist enemies, and in some cases former clients, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.⁸⁰ The origins of this divergence are usually sought in the history of religious and linguistic divisions in Syria, and the accompanying vulnerability of the state to external interference: these are certainly important factors, but as I seek to demonstrate below, they intersect with and operate on the terrain of political economy. Sectarian identity is vital to understanding the Syrian crisis, but it is not an *a priori* variable that precedes processes of political economy and authoritarian state-building: as demonstrated below it acquires meaning and salience through those processes.

The history of the Syrian regime and its ruling economic interests presents broadly similar story to that of Egypt, Tunisia and other formerly radical republics. As in Tunisia and Egypt, the large landlords and urban notables were dispossessed in the 1960s: the mobilisation of poor peasants merging with the more urban Ba'ath during this period.⁸¹ What made its trajectory somewhat different was that whereas Egypt and Tunisia made decisive turns to the West and market policies in the late 1970s, Hafez Al-Assad's 'corrective movement' was directed against the Ba'ath Left but was accompanied by far less overt

marketisation.⁸² The neoliberal moment in Syria came later, its tentative beginnings in the last years of Assad *pere*, then accelerated under Bashar.⁸³

A result, intersecting with the dynamics (and instrumental use) of sectarian identification, has been a Syrian bourgeoisie especially stratified by its access to the state.⁸⁴ Bassem Haddad refers to these as ‘the new economic elite’ (in both state and private varieties), the old bourgeoisie, and the independent businesspeople.⁸⁵ The former group is, unsurprisingly, largely Alawite, and where not identical to the political and military leadership of the state, stands in solidarity with it. Although Bassem Haddad describes this as a state elite, it must also be recognised that to perhaps an even greater degree than other dictatorial clans, the Assads (and the Makhoulouf) acquired an enormous slice of the country's wealth through covert privatization programmes. Rami Makhoulouf, Hafez' brother-in-law, has been reported to control 60% of Syria's economic activity⁸⁶. Even if this is an overestimate, it is certain that Makhoulouf controls significant sectors of the liberalised Syrian economy, such as mobile telephone networks that became a target for protests in the early days of the revolution.⁸⁷

Within the ‘new economic elite’ there are both inner and outer layers. The outer sections of regime-linked capital, as opposed to the old merchant families, established themselves in the high period of Syrian *dirigisme* in the 1970s and 1980s and moved with the times, becoming private businessmen as the economy was neoliberalized.⁸⁸ This group is more widely spread, and less directly connected to the ruling family.⁸⁹ Religious minorities feature but there are also representatives of the Sunni majority. However, their reliance on closeness to the regime ensures their loyalty.

The Syrian old bourgeoisie began as urban merchants and remain concentrated in textiles and internal trade.⁹⁰ Largely, if not exclusively Sunni, this group and its periphery formed the backbone of opposition to Ba'athist radicalism in the 1960s.⁹¹ A non-aggression

pact of sorts prevailed afterwards between an Alawite state elite on the one hand and a Sunni economic elite on the other—albeit with the distrust between the two hampering further neoliberalisation.⁹² The attitude of the old bourgeoisie to the Syrian revolution seems to have been one of wary vacillation.

As in the previous two cases, class formation at the top of Syrian society is tied into both the degree of autonomy of the state and geopolitical relations. In Syria the connection of state, regime and family (and therefore also sect) was the closest of all our examples.⁹³ The hard core of securocrats and connected businessmen were drawn from the same community, in a relationship that then cascaded down through the state apparatus. This structure is often ascribed to sectarianism, but the relationship can be said to work the other way: Hafez al-Assad carefully constructed the sharp edge of the state so that his clientele, most often kin and co-religionists, controlled the key positions.⁹⁴ Fear of the resentment provoked by this perceived privilege among the Sunni majority would serve to bind the minorities, and particularly the Alawites, to the ruling core even as they suffered the same political repression as other Syrians.⁹⁵ This strategy has proved extremely successful.

The pre-2011 Syrian state was of course not a purely Alawite preserve. However, it formed a kind of escape pod for the ruling core: as the uprising spread, the hardliners sloughed off the less loyal parts of the armed forces in particular—some of which went on to become the Free Syrian Army—until only the tougher sectarian nucleus was left.⁹⁶ This had the result of shoring up Bashar al-Assad, but also of causing the fracture and retreat of the state itself from many parts of the country.

These dynamics were linked to Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens' final power cluster: the geopolitical conjuncture. Syria experienced particularly severe competition from both the regional and global levels, as the uprising intersected with regional and global new cold wars. Russia, Iran and Iraq backed the Assad regime to the hilt: Saudi Arabia and Qatar

fought out their rivalry with each other in the battlefields and halls of the opposition, while sharing an enemy in Iran. The Western powers maintained a rhetorical commitment to the overthrow of Assad—much as he had maintained a rhetorical commitment to anti-imperialism—while remaining wary of dispensing weaponry. This external involvement also increased the sectarian threat to the uprising, as the regime retreated ever more to its non-Sunni rump, with the hardest fighting done by Iraqi and Lebanese Shia militias trained by Iranian Revolutionary Guards.⁹⁷ Likewise, Gulf funding flowed to the more conservative Sunni elements.⁹⁸ The most isolated and underfunded forces were those who had begun the uprising under the banner of a democratic and secular Syria.

The array of internal and external forces aligned against the Syrian uprising was formidable: it was not matched by organized challenge from a labour movement on the other side. To a greater degree even than in Egypt, any scope for independent rank and file action had been crushed by the time of the uprising. There was no equivalent of Gafsa, or Mahalla: strikes or uprisings preceding a broader revolt. Following Bashar's neoliberal reforms, the Syrian trade unions lost even the limited access to the state they had held under Hafez.⁹⁹ Left parties were occasionally tolerated where they represented little threat or could be used as a counterweight to Islamists: or (very successfully) incorporated into the 'anti-imperialist' regime. In the absence of independent political or economic organization (crushed by the weight with which the regime fell on all elements of civil society), it is unsurprising that little open working class struggle took place in Syria prior to the uprising. The corporatist state unions were used to mobilize shows of support for Bashar al-Assad.¹⁰⁰ Local strikes occurred but nothing on the scale of Tunisia or Egypt.

The class nature of the Syrian revolution was evident rather in a geographical split. The centres of opposition were mainly provincial centres and small towns (largely Sunni) that suffered the neglect and drought of the 2000s: the revolution encroached on the cities from

the countryside, and on the centre of the cities from their destitute peripheries. Where the Syrian state fractured, its collapse was much deeper than in any of the other Arab revolutions: but the areas involved were geographically limited. The heart of this self-organisation was the Local Co-ordination Committees composed of activists directing demonstrations, in some cases merged with local committees formed to take over state functions, which then constituted higher levels of governance.¹⁰¹ Parts of Syria saw the first free elections for decades and a degree of popular autonomy perhaps greater than in any other of the Arab revolutions. These bodies sometimes proclaimed social reforms reversing the policies of the Bashar years.¹⁰²

However, this geographic limitation proved a fatal weakness. With no nationwide organisation such as the UGTT and the external opposition was fractured into competing groups,¹⁰³ the revolution internally was locked into an unavoidable military struggle with the regime ¹⁰⁴ allowing the limited pockets of revolutionary Syria to be crushed from two sources.¹⁰⁵ On the one hand the regime, with the advantage of time and resources from its Iranian and Russian backers was able to grind out a siege of the liberated areas until morale inevitably collapsed. On the other, sectarian forces such as *Da'esh*—opposed by the revolutionaries and ambiguous in its relationship to the regime—took advantage of the power vacuum in the liberated areas to replace Ba'thist authoritarianism with their own even grislier version.

Conclusion

Where does the comparative study of the balance of class forces and class alliances, histories of state autonomy and geopolitical conjunctures lead in the study of state tangents in the wake of the Arab uprisings? Representing as they do extreme and mid-points along a continuum of

outcomes of the revolutionary uprisings, examination of these three cases using the approach of *Capitalist Development and Democracy* yields instructive conclusions.

To recapitulate these: ‘bourgeois’ democracy most often accompanies proletarian organizational strength. Tunisia’s constitutional settlement does not solely derive from the presence of the UGTT but, as demonstrated above, the organization did play a crucial role. In Syria, by contrast, there was no independent labour organization (despite an impressive previous history) to spread the popular uprising across the territory of the state. Of course, the uprising did spread, especially in the form of sympathy demonstrations for besieged cities: however, these never penetrated central Damascus in particular. Egypt formed a middle case, with an independent union movement playing a strong role in the revolution, but its leadership eventually siding with the *ancien régime* in its struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood.

These differences interacted with degrees of state autonomy and geopolitical interest. The Tunisian state, although not autonomous of capital, certainly had a degree of distance from the ruling clan and a uni-directional relationship with an external power. The Egyptian state, and its core in the armed forces, had an even greater stake in the economy but precisely for that reason a greater need to dispense with the Mubarak clique when they became a liability to the operation of these interests. Syria suffered an unhappy confluence of factors: a greater unity of state, ruling clique and business interests on the one hand and a particularly sharp geopolitical competition over the fate of the country on the other.

Democratic transition theory has sought explanations for the ‘failure’ of the Arab revolutions in the nature of the ‘transition’ negotiations and secular-Islamist but while these may have their part to play, as this article has sought to demonstrate, even the most minimal democratic guarantees are only likely when classes with the least to lose are weak, and those with the most to gain are strong.

Notes

¹ Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds, “Why the Modest Harvest?”, 29.

² See Schlumberger, “Opening Old Bottles in Search of New Wine”; Salame, *Democracy Without Democrats*; Valbjorn, “Upgrading Post-democratization Studies”; Cavatorta, “The Convergence of Governance”; Cavatorta and Pace, “The Arab Uprisings in Theoretical Perspective - An Introduction.”

³ Stepan and Linz, “Democratization Theory”, 15, 20-21.

⁴ O’Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, 16.

⁵ Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*.

⁶ Teti, “Beyond Lies the Wub”, 15.

⁷ Such as O’Donnell, *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Argentina*.

⁸ Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds, “Why the Modest Harvest?,” 29–31.

⁹ Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, 5–7.

¹⁰ Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic*, 2–7; Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market*, 9–12.

¹¹ Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market*, 167–70.

¹² Brown, “Egypt’s Failed Transition”, 52.

¹³ O’Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, 16–17.

¹⁴ Landolt and Kubicek, “Opportunities and Constraints”, 8.

¹⁵ Brown, “Egypt’s Failed Transition”, 51.

¹⁶ Stepan and Linz, “Democratization Theory and the Arab Spring,” 28.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸ Carrothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” 5–7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10–12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

²¹ See especially Brown “Egypt’s Failed Transition”, 45-56; Landolt and Kubicek “Opportunities and Constraints”, 12–16; Stepan and Linz, “Democratization Theory”, 23–7.

²² Stepan, “Tunisia’s Transition and the Twin Tolerations”, *passim*.

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- ²³ *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Argentina 1966-1973 in Comparative Perspective*.
- ²⁴ See also Goran Therborn “The Rule of Capital”.
- ²⁵ Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, 10.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 7–8.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 6–8, 75–6.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 58–9.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid., 8.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Ibid., 72.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 65–6.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 7.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 76–7.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 59.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 53.
- ³⁹ Omri, “The Tunisian Constitution”
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, 2–9.
- ⁴² Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, 77.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ayubi, *Overstating the Arab State*, 355.
- ⁴⁵ Achcar, *The People Want*, 92–3.
- ⁴⁶ Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, 5–6.
- ⁴⁷ Achcar, *The People Want*, 83.
- ⁴⁸ Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, 40–1.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 95.

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- ⁵⁰ Stepan and Linz, “Democratization Theory”, 26; Achcar, *The People Want*, 76–7.
- ⁵¹ Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, 65.
- ⁵² Achcar, *The People Want*, 179.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 75.
- ⁵⁴ Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, 40–2.
- ⁵⁵ Achcar, *The People Want*, 231.
- ⁵⁶ For example Landolt and Kubicek, “Opportunities and Constraints”, 8.
- ⁵⁷ Ayubi, *Overstating the Arab State*, 211.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 212–13.
- ⁵⁹ Achcar, *The People Want*, 178.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., 180.
- ⁶¹ Torelli, “Tunisia: A New Prime Minister?”.
- ⁶² Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt*, 87–9.
- ⁶³ Roccu, “David Harvey in Tahrir Square,” 433–4.
- ⁶⁴ Roccu, “Gramsci in Cairo,” 110.
- ⁶⁵ Marshall and Stacher, “Egypt’s Generals and Transnational Capital”
- ⁶⁶ Springborg, *Mubarak’s Egypt*, 213–14.
- ⁶⁷ Achcar, *The People Want*, 284–5
- ⁶⁸ Ibid
- ⁶⁹ International Crisis Group, *Lost in Transition*, 16–20.
- ⁷⁰ Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprisings*, 186–7.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 228–9.
- ⁷² Teti, Matthies-Boon, and Gervasio, “Sisiphus.”
- ⁷³ Springborg and Henry, *Globalization and the Politics of Development in the Middle East*, 189.
- ⁷⁴ Beinín, *The Rise of Egypt’s Workers*, 4–5.
- ⁷⁵ *Workers’ Rights in Egypt*, 49.
- ⁷⁶ Beinín, “Egyptian Workers After June 30th.”

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- ⁷⁷ Ibid.
- ⁷⁸ Roccu, “David Harvey in Tahrir Square: The Dispossessed, the Discontented, and the Egyptian Revolution,” 13–14.
- ⁷⁹ El-Shazli, “Where Were the Egyptian Workers?”
- ⁸⁰ Neumann, “Suspects into Collaborators.”
- ⁸¹ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, 31–4.
- ⁸² Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria*, chapter 3.
- ⁸³ Achcar, *The People Want*, 60.
- ⁸⁴ Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria*, chapter 3.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid.
- ⁸⁶ Achcar, *The People Want*, 214.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸⁸ Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria*, chapter 3
- ⁸⁹ Ibid.
- ⁹⁰ Ibid.
- ⁹¹ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, 43.
- ⁹² Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria*, Chapter 3.
- ⁹³ Achcar, *The People Want*, 209–10.
- ⁹⁴ Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, 45.
- ⁹⁵ Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprisings*, 219–20.
- ⁹⁶ Heydemann, “Future of Authoritarianism,” 67–70.
- ⁹⁷ Holliday, *The Assad Regime*, 10; Heydemann, “Future of Authoritarianism,” 69–70.
- ⁹⁸ O’Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, 22.
- ⁹⁹ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, 112.
- ¹⁰⁰ Naisse, “Al-Burjuwaziya al-Suriya”, 93.
- ¹⁰¹ Gopal, “Welcome to Free Syria.”
- ¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ O'Bagy, *Syria's Political Opposition*, 13–19.

¹⁰⁴ Achcar, *The People Want*, 175.

¹⁰⁵ Achcar, *The People Want*, 175.

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